

Literature in Practice: Sharing Suzanne Kamata's *A Girls' Guide to the Islands* with EFL students

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Abstract

A Girls' Guide to the Islands, by Suzanne Kamata and published by Gemma Open Door in 2017 is an ungraded text, and has been written for teen to young adult English language learners. Gemma Open Door specializes in publishing works for ESL learners and young adults with developing literacy skills. Kamata's narrative differs from the titles in graded EFL reader series in Japan, as the target audience is English language learners in the United States. Kamata has created a text with appeal to young adult learners of a similar age to the young female protagonist. In this short Literature in Practice article, I aim to provide an explanation of why I chose an ESL reader instead of an EFL one, my reasons for choosing to read this story aloud to the class, and an outline of my creation of classroom activities.

Keywords: authentic stories, reading aloud, live reading, lexico-grammar

Description of the Teaching Context

For several years I have had my second year students in General Education classes listen to a live reading of a single story each week, and followed it up with listening to an audio-book for homework. Students in my General Education classes come from the Engineering, Medical and Socio-Arts faculties. English is a required subject for first and second year students in all faculties and no previous experience of extensive reading is assumed. Teachers are free to determine their own assessment criteria. My assessment criteria consist of weekly listening tests, a final test, and a weekly homework assignment of listening to audio-books and either responding to the quizzes or completing written responses to the text. This year I was assigned a class of first year Science students. Rather than reading a single story to them each week I decided to read them a longer narrative over the semester, and chose *A Girls' Guide to the Islands* which describes a visit to some nearby islands in the Inland Sea. I hoped the focus on a single story, set in a familiar location, would provide them with continuity over the semester.

Why Use an ESL Reader Instead of an EFL One?

Besides its obvious communicative function, language can also be appreciated for its aesthetic function (Cook, 2000; Hasan, 1985). The gradual transition in English language teaching in Japan from the translation of literary works to communicative English has arguably led to the tendency to neglect the aesthetic domain of language. Nevertheless some have argued in favour of introducing literature to English learners. McNabb (2013) describes the kind of English found in textbooks as caretaker English, and contrasts this with the value and prestige accorded to literature (p.40). Maley (2017) persuasively explains: “Literature surely has a role to play, both as a counterweight to an excessively pragmatic view of language, but also as a necessary enrichment of language learning at the highest levels” (p. 165). Kamata’s work is an example of how we can redress this imbalance, because it provides an entrée into language as art. An EFL graded reader is suited to solitary reading because less scaffolding from the teacher is required to understand the content; I typically have students read graded EFL audio-books for homework. This year, during the class time, I decided to read Kamata’s narrative because of its literary value and its wider range of lexico-grammar than in typical graded readers.

Why Conduct Reading Aloud Instead of Silent Reading?

As Murphey (2016) explains, the benefits of the interaction between the teacher and students that occur during an actual class outweigh those obtained when passively reading outside of the class. I anticipated that I would be able to provide the necessary scaffolding for students to understand this text during a live reading. I did not have the students passively listen to me read, but rather required them to actively respond as I read aloud, as I will explain.

Arguably, silent reading is more suited to proficient readers than English learners. Lefevre (1964) has described English orthography as “a mnemonic device which helps the reader recall the intonation” (p.4). Nevertheless the mnemonic of English orthography cannot help English learners recall the intonation if they are not familiar with it in the first place. In order to scaffold reading, and because of the barriers posed by differences in the orthographic systems of Japanese and English, Isozaki (2014) urges teachers to supplement reading with listening to audio recordings. She recommends variations to this technique such as reading-while-listening, having learners control the pace of their reading and listening, and having the option of reading and listening simultaneously or separately. Wood (2017) recommends reading-while-listening, and listening before reading. He urges teachers to experiment with different ways of implementing these activities, because the field is still emerging. Cheetham (2017) recommends going beyond bimodal input. He explains the

neuroscientific basis for providing language learners with multi-modal input, in contrast to simply having them read silently. Learners benefit from supplementary input such as observing faces and gestures while listening, and reading while listening. Cheetham calls this a “superadditive effect”. Reading aloud to the students permits the teacher to add eye contact, gestures and an interpersonal dimension to the delivery of the story.

Another limitation of silent reading is that the writing may lead to assumptions about pronunciation which do not match the actual pronunciation (Field, 2003, Milton et al., 2010). The act of silent reading in L2 English will not sensitize the readers to the ways in which the pronunciation of words changes according to the contextual sounds. Reading aloud delivers additional input and provides a kind of scaffolding to make the text easier to follow.

Many other theorists informed my decision to provide a live reading to the students. Thornbury (2013) explains that learning is not just a cognitive but also a social practice, and that linguistic as well as paralinguistic features characterize the interaction between the people in the room. According to Walter Ong (1982) “Spoken words are always modifications of a total, existential situation, which always engages the body.” (p.67). Wajnyrb (2001) explains “the active collusion and complicity of the interlocutor whose involvement actually, if invisibly, shapes the unfolding nature of the text” (p.176). Damasio (1994) argues “mind is probably not conceivable without some sort of *embodiment*” (p.234). I speculated that the embodied practice of delivering a live reading would provide more benefits to the students than having them listen to an audio-recording. Inspired by these writers, I conducted my own research, and confirmed that many of my students prefer listening to a live reading as a group, to listening to an audio-book for homework (Stephens, 2017). Encouraged and informed by their feedback, I have maintained the practice of reading aloud to my students in compulsory English classes.

The Plot

The story narrated Kamata and her twelve-year-old daughter Lilia’s trip to see Yayoi Kusama’s works at the National Museum of Art in Osaka. Kamata described the bus trip from Shikoku to Osaka, crossing the bridge over the whirlpools of the Naruto Strait, Awaji Island, through to the metropolises of Kobe and Osaka. I was relieved to be able to provide a story situated in a setting so familiar to many of my students. As Lilia is multiply disabled, Kamata was worried about the exertion required to push a wheelchair around a big city, and even having to carry her. Nevertheless, she was spurred on by Lilia’s enthusiasm, and also by the inspiration Kusama provided in having become an internationally acclaimed artist despite the considerable adversity she

has suffered over her lifetime. As I read this chapter to my students, they were captivated by the determination of a parent to ensure her daughter did not miss out on cultural pursuits that able-bodied people take for granted.

Encouraged by the success of the trip to the Kusama exhibition, Kamata prepared to take Lilia on another trip, this time to the islands of the Inland Sea. She detailed the difficulties inherent in traveling in a wheelchair that few of us would ordinarily consider, such as pushing a wheelchair in the rain. When Kamata and Lilia were on the ferry from Takamatsu to Naoshima, Lilia stayed in their car in the bottom of the ferry, unable to ascend the stairs to the deck. Nonetheless, the story was not a litany of complaints but an account of how to unflinchingly tackle hardships.

Later the story covered a trip to another island in the Inland Sea, Shodoshima, renowned for its olive production, and its friendship with the Greek Island of Mykonos. Another literary figure in Shikoku, known in the story as Wendy, joined Kamata and Lilia for the tour of Shodoshima. The story finished on a poignant note when Lilia announced that the next time she visited the island she would come with her friends. Kamata was stunned by this declaration, but accepted Lilia's determination to move to independence. She describes the dialectic tension of wanting to take more trips with Lilia, and yet wanting Lilia to be able to travel without her, and concludes the narrative on a hopeful note, "Sometimes it seems as if all the beauty of the world is within our reach" (p. 96).

Complementary Class Activities

For many years Davis and Rinvolutri's (1988) *Dictation*, and Ruth Wajnryb's *Grammar Dictation* (1990) have been staples of my teacher resource collection. Early in my career in Japan I understood that fostering listening comprehension of both details and gist warranted my attention. I continue to derive inspiration from these classic texts and have used some form of dictation in every General Education (i.e., compulsory) class I have taught in the last ten years. The activities below have been inspired by these authors' work, and I designed them so they could be used when teaching a narrative that is read aloud over a semester.

Synonym replacement exercise. I used a technique that I had used when reading aloud to previous classes to ensure the students' attention. I changed ten of the words in each chapter to high frequency synonyms, and had them submit the ten synonyms after the reading as a weekly mini-test, which constituted 40% of their assessment. The advantage of this technique was that it promoted attentiveness as students intensely concentrated on simultaneously processing the written and spoken texts. The disadvantage was that I may have been altering the author's intent by

substituting some of the words with synonyms. Arguably there are no true synonyms, because every word has been chosen by the author purposefully and no word is used randomly. On the other hand, paraphrasing others' speech is both an everyday practice and a useful skill.

Illustrating the storyline. Another post-reading activity was for student pairs to produce a six to ten (depending on the time available) picture comic of the chapter. I tried to avoid comprehension questions as a way of monitoring their understanding, because such questions belong to the category of lower-order thinking skills (knowledge, comprehension and application), in Bloom's taxonomy (Davidson & Decker, 2006). Furthermore, Nagatomo (2012, p.163) criticized the use of comprehension questions in a Japanese university English, class because they neither aided the student to engage with the text nor to improve her English. Instead of having the students respond to comprehension questions I had them create a picture comic. The activity to at least some degree conforms with Bruner's (1996) description of human learning: "it is best when it is participatory, proactive, communal, collaborative, and given over to constructing meanings rather than receiving them" (p. 84). All of my students produced high-quality illustrations which quickly alerted me to their level of comprehension. As I observed their illustrations of the neighbouring Awaji Island, and Naruto whirlpools, en route from our city to Osaka, I was gratified again to have been able to provide them with an English-language story set in such a familiar location. Figure 1 is a sample of student work, based on the section of the book describing the journey from Shikoku to Naoshima. The students took about twenty minutes to produce the picture comic.

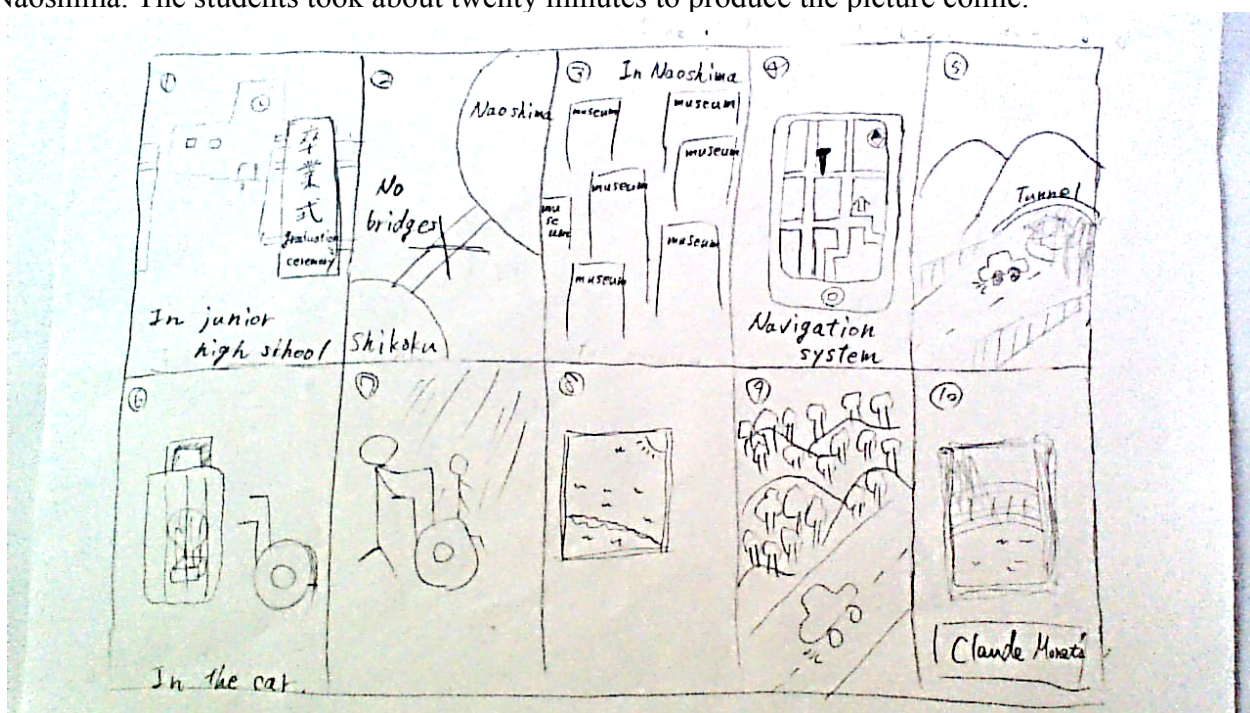


Figure 1. A student's illustration of Shikoku to Naoshima

Promoting Awareness of Collocations.

Nuttall (1996, p.151) explains that the goal of second language reading instruction is top-down or global understanding, rather than that of minutiae. She recommends beginning with a top-down approach and then moving between that and a bottom-up approach as the need arises. The act of reading a story aloud conforms to the top-down approach, but it can be usefully supplemented with bottom-up activities such as focusing on collocations. I have found knowledge of collocations to be an area which merits attention in all of my classes, so used the book as an opportunity to draw attention to them. I highlighted several collocations in each of the chapters we were reading, followed by quizzes to prompt students to memorize them, in the hope that they could draw on them in the future, rather than translating from a Japanese collocation.

Another exercise was to have students identify collocations expressed in terms of an adjective and a noun ('big bushy beard') or two nouns in which the first describes the second ('gift shop,' 'picture book'). The purpose was to have students focus on natural collocations in an unsimplified text. The sample of student work in Figure 2 below features a list of collocations from the chapter covered on that particular day, accompanied by illustrations. As with the picture comic, it was hoped that the students would make a direct connection with the collocation and the image instead of devoting their time to producing an accurate Japanese translation.

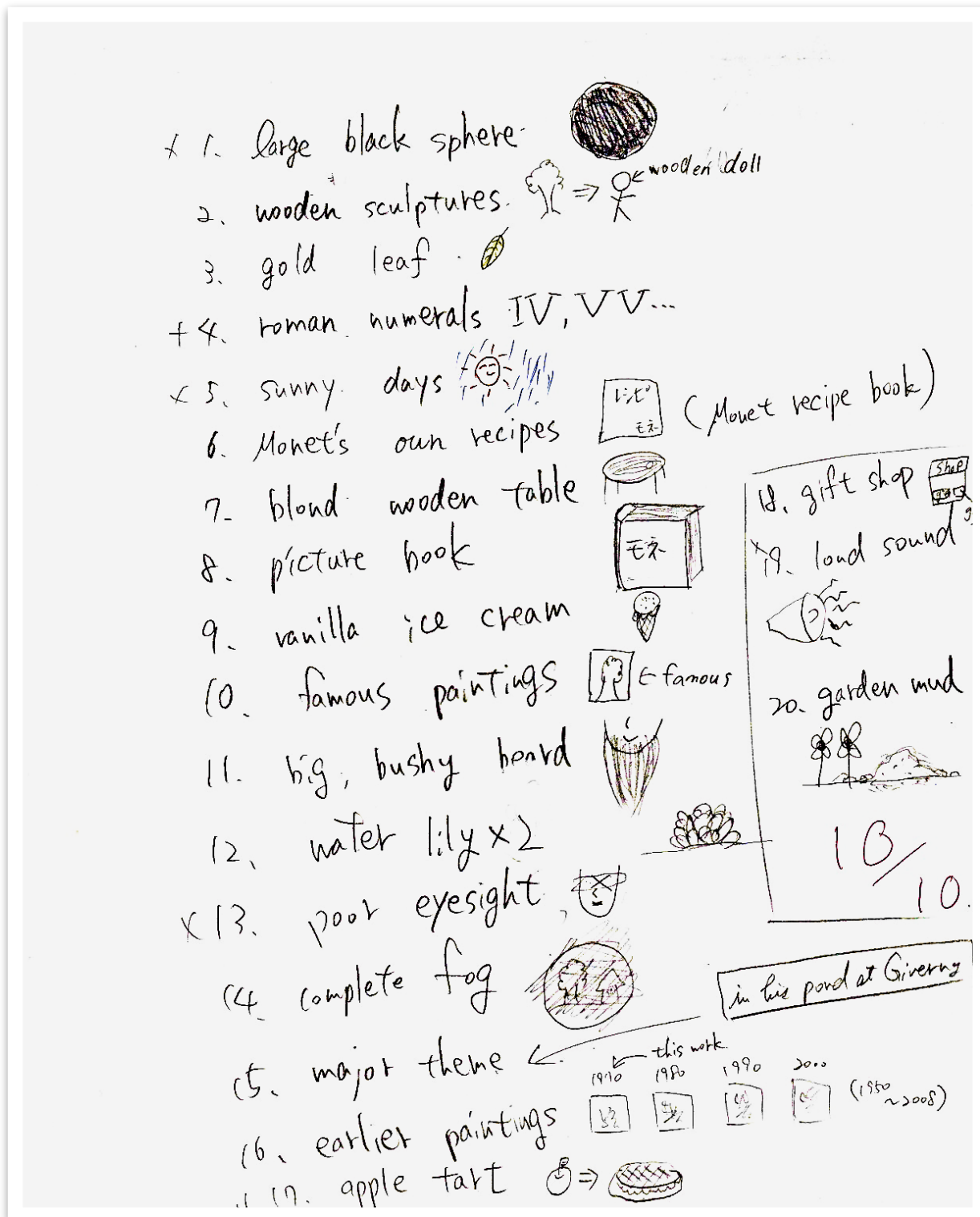


Figure 2. Student-illustrated collocations

Collocations can become more fluently activated from short-term memory through repetition; to support this, we played a motivational game requiring accurate repetition, known as 'Telephone.' I divided the class into four teams, and had them form four queues from the front to the back of the class. I passed along a collocation to the first in the queues, and they whispered them along the line to the last person, who wrote them down. When they finished the last person came to

the board and wrote the collocations there. The team with the most correctly spelt collocations was the winner.

Fostering Understanding of the Text

Rather than foster comprehension through a traditional focus on the translation of individual lexical items, I took inspiration from various sources, such as Nuttall's (1996) notion of global understanding, Stern (2010), who describes "our passing over phonemes to grasp a word, or passing over words to capture the sense of a phrase," (p.14) and finally Halliday and Yallop (2007) who explain "words are first and foremost elements of text, elements occurring in actual discourse, not isolated items listed in a dictionary" (p.77). As I read the story aloud to them, I paused intermittently to parse the story in English and Japanese, in order to foster global understanding of the story rather than dissecting the text into discrete lexical items. For example, when explaining the sentence "The sixty-something couple who run the place seem unfazed by Lilia's wheelchair" (p. 64), I did not take the time to explain every presumed unknown word in the sentence, but rather made brief passing commentary in English and Japanese, and let them infer the rest of the meaning from the context. This was important because I wanted to maintain the focus on attaining a global understanding rather than becoming too distracted with the details of a bottom-up approach.

Nevertheless, I overheard conversations of pairs of students deliberating how to interpret various phrases in the text, and was prompted to consider that they have traditionally interpreted texts by using a dictionary, and recalling vocabulary which had been learned by rote. I consulted Gairns and Redman's (1986) classic, *Working with words* in which they explain that rote learning lacks depth of processing for retention in long term memory, and that "lists of translation equivalents may be counter-productive for learners, as memorisation of this type may delay the process of establishing new semantic networks in a foreign language" (p. 93). Most of my students' previous experiences of reading in English probably consisted of memorizing lists of translation equivalents, or translation-while-reading, otherwise known as *yakudoku* (see Gorsuch, 1998), or intensive reading (Day & Bamford, 1998, p.123). My methodology diverged from traditional practice in that there was no word for word translation of the story. Perhaps because of the familiar context, or perhaps because of my supplementary explanations, the authentic lexico-grammar in the story did not prevent the students from understanding the gist; their comprehension was clearly indicated by the picture comics and illustrations of collocations that they rapidly produced in pairs while discussing the text with their partner. The students were told to produce one picture per pair,

and that both members of the pair would receive the same grade. Therefore they had an incentive to cooperate in order to produce illustrations which accurately reflected the meaning of the text.

Recommendations for Future Research

The traditional focus on English language teaching has been a bottom-up approach which fosters an understanding of details (Gorsuch,1998;Wood, 2017). However Nuttall (1996) advises that fostering a global understanding is a more important aim than analysing the parts that make up the whole. Reading a narrative as a class is one way of fostering global comprehension. Future research could focus on how to further foster top-down comprehension skills when reading a narrative. For example, students' insights into this process could be elicited through reflective journals, group discussions or feedback of other types to clarify the process of attaining top-down comprehension skills.

Conclusion

An authentic, manageable narrative may be an appropriate choice for a text which is read as a class, because the teacher can facilitate the interpretation of even relatively difficult passages. Kamata's narrative is a more compelling story than many graded readers, because of the familiar setting, the fact that it is a true story, and the richness of her metaphors. Because the lexicogrammar is more complex than that of a graded reader, I would recommend parsing it in English and in the first language of the students as well, when possible. For teachers who prefer an English-only approach, I would suggest using this narrative with a higher level reading group, such English majors in their first or second year. Because of the detailed descriptions of Japanese tourist locations, the insight that can be gained about traveling with a disability, and the sheer enjoyment of a thought-provoking story written by a prize-winning author, I highly recommend *A Girls' Guide to the Islands* as a choice of a narrative to be read aloud to a class.

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